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ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate forensics (speech and debate) programs represent an outgrowth of the communication curriculum. As such, the goal of forensic programs is to encourage students to become responsible advocates in democratic societies through developing appropriate communication skills and attitudes. This paper extends earlier research, providing support for the conclusion that current forensics practices may discourage development of advocacy skills for women. Through stories reported on critical incident surveys, female participants reported that rather than enhancing their ability to become strong advocates, their experiences often frustrate, confuse and silence them. Contains 35 references; a taxonomy of women's gender-based experiences in intercollegiate forensics is attached. (Author/RS)

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The Sounds of Silence:

The Gender-Based Experiences of Women in Intercollegiate Forensics

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Abstract

Intercollegiate forensics (speech and debate) programs represent an outgrowth of the communication curriculum. As such, the goal of forensic programs is to encourage students to become responsible advocates in democratic societies through developing appropriate communication skills and attitudes. This paper extends earlier research, providing support for the conclusion that current forensics practices may discourage development of advocacy skills for women. Through stories reported on critical incident surveys, female participants reported that rather than enhancing their ability to become strong advocates, their experiences often frustrate, confuse and silence them.

The Sounds of Silence:

The Gender-Based Experiences of Women in Intercollegiate Forensics

That women's experiences in intercollegiate forensics (i.e., competitive debate and individual events) differ from the experiences of their male contemporaries comes as no surprise to the thousands of women who have participated, nor is it entirely unexpected in an activity which traces its historical origins to a time when women were barred from higher education (Greenstreet, 1989). That such inequity continues to exist nearly a century after the advent of intercollegiate forensics activities is more difficult to accept (Norton, 1982; Rieke & Sillars, 1975). To discover women struggling to find a voice in an activity that claims to be an extension of the communication classroom is more than discouraging (Doherty, 1994;Gallos, 1995). The goal of encourage forensic participation by members of traditionally underrepresented groups, (thus fostering a more diverse experience for participants, allowing them to gain a greater appreciation for a variety of experiences and views) has not been realized (McBath, 1975; Parson, 1984; Ziegelmueller, 1984; Bartanen, 1993; Duke, 1994). Logue (1993) claims intercollegiate debate marginalizes women (as well as minorities) through a structure which assures white male dominance.

Forensics research has traditionally ignored the presence of women. Tomlinson (1986) failed to consider gender-oriented issues (e.g., participation rates, bias, harassment) in an examination of issues confronting the Cross Examination Debate Association. When Littlefield and Sellnow (1992) studied stress at the American Forensic Association-National Individual Event Tournament, they did not isolate gender as a variable. Porter and Sommerness' (1991) review of "Legal Issues Confronting the Director of Forensics" mentioned no gender-specific legal issues. Gill (1990); Sellnow and Ziegelmueller (1988); and McMillan and Todd-Mancillas (1991) gathered sufficient demographic data in their research projects to differentiate gender differences, yet none appears to have sought such distinctions, even when gender demographics are reported in their results.

Present research provides a taxonomy of women's gender based experiences in intercollegiate forensics (Greenstreet, Joeckel, Martin, & Piercy, 1998; see Appendix A). Positive experiences include

expression of gratitude or recognition, mentoring, access to positions through quotas, consciousness-raising, and nurturing behaviors/expressions of personal concern. These positive experiences function to include women in the intercollegiate forensics community. Negative experiences encompass sexual harassment (sexual propositions, verbal abuse and remarks about body or appearance) sexism (women should fulfill traditional roles, the expressed attitude that feminine is less than masculine), discrimination in employment, lack of support/failure to recognize silencing behaviors as a problem, aggression/conflict, and overemphasis on competition. The negative experience function to isolate women from the forensics community as "outsiders." Certainly the discipline of communication is not immune to such practices (Wood, 1992).

This taxonomy provides the jumping-off point for this project, which is designed to determine whether the experiences of subjects of the previous study are reflected in the experiences of women currently competing on a local (Oklahoma and Kansas) circuit designed to provide a supportive climate for diverse competition and to gather information addressing that circuit's success in providing a competitive, educational climate in which women are encouraged to find their rhetorical voices.

Method

Data were gathered through the Critical Incident Technique, a method which has been used in thousands of studies in both education and industry. Greenstreet, Joeckel, Martin, and Piercy (1998) asked over 280 female members of forensics organizations to provide brief descriptions about specific gender-based events they found significant to their forensics experience. While very few of their subjects were undergraduates competing in intercollegiate forensics, we redistributed 60 sets of critical incident report forms (see Appendix B) to women competing in three intercollegiate forensic tournament (a state championship tournament, a "regular" tournament, and a season-ending capstone tournament). At the state championship tournament forms were distributed at an open assembly and the female author of this report contacted potential subjects individual thought the event to encourage participation. At the other tournaments, forms were available for potential subjects, but no other encouragement was provided.

As in the earlier study, students were asked to relate their stories of a positive and negative gender based incident related to their experience in forensics. While critical incident studies are difficult to conduct, Flanagan (1954) explains "critical incidents obtained from interviews can be relied on to provide a relatively accurate account" of the subjects' experiences (p. 331). Since critical incident studies seek to discover the perspective of the subjects, completed critical incident reports were reviewed without judgement as to whether the incident was correct, perceived "correctly" or represents a valid perspective. Doherty (1994) contends the importance of allowing women to express themselves as they wish without judgement or censor, but to allow their voice, their story, to speak for them. Empowering women by allowing them to use their voice "begins to provide them with a way of reversing what had previously been their lot, silencing." If researchers were to impose their own perspective on the incidents (not allowing women to express themselves in their own words), they would continue the patriarchic confinement of women that has robbed them of a history by undervaluing their life stories (Perry, 1997).

Variations on the Critical Incident Technique have been used in recent studies in the discipline of communication. The Journal of Applied Communication Research (Wood, 1992) recently published a "SPECIAL SECTION—'TELLING OUR STORIES': SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE" (capitals in original) to focus attention on an issue critical to communication scholars. The narratives provided by respondents in the study represent critical incidents focused on sexual harassment. Foss and Foss (1994) indicate the use of personal experience in feminist scholarship empowers women by validating their experiences and helping them make sense of their world. "The exploration and use of personal experience as data is a significant and subversive act in the process of constructing new methods and theories that truly take women's perspectives into account" (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 42). Feminist standpoint theory suggests that historically marginalized "others" have traditionally been excluded from dominant systems and therefore oppressed. The theory posits that we can only encourage the inclusion of those oppressed by turning to the voices and experiences of "others." Only by focusing on these muted voices as resources for resistance and change can understanding and change occur (Bullis, 1993).

Results

Of sixty sets of forms distributed to participants at three intercollegiate tournaments, twenty forms were returned. The rate of return is discussed at length elsewhere in the paper.

Of those forms returned, only a couple were positive. While not related to gender, some subjects indicated they felt positively about an activity which affords them the opportunity too develop critical thinking and presentation skills. One reports "I've always thought of debate as an educational experience It has helped my speaking skills and many numerous things. Debate has influenced me enough to be a debate coach." Nurturing/personal concern appeared in a couple of reports. One subject said. "I have had so many positive experiences with Pi Kappa Delta and the forensic activity. Perhaps the best experience I have had over my years of participation is the relationships I have developed with fellow females. The main reason being we realize we are the minority and we have united as a gender...." Another reports she enjoyed men holding doors for her, which is consistent with nurturing behavior. The positive experiences appear to support Gilligan's (1982) argument that women mature toward a different moral ethic from men. Gilligan argues women mature toward an ethic of caring and affiliation rather than toward individuation. Such experiences include them (and allow them to include others) in the intercollegiate forensics community, reveal the concern of that community for them as individuals, and reinforce their sense of agency by recognizing their unique place in that community.

Most of the forms dealt with negative experiences. The negative incidences appear to further support Gilligan's (1982) view, especially as several items correspond to behaviors which segregate or indicate either neutrality or outright hostility. Many subjects reported experiencing silencing behaviors from judges, coaches, male competitors and female competitors-in short, from just about all roles represented in the activity. Their stories recount experiences with several dimensions of the taxonomy. One incident appears consistent with the category of sexism (feminism is less than masculine). The subject reported remarks from male judges about performing female-oriented literature (literature about being a woman). Comments about a contestant's selection of literature are usually secondary to criticism of the

student's performance. In this instance, the subject reported she felt the judge did not "attempt to relate" to her choice of material because the literature dealt with the experience of being a woman.

Several subjects reported sexual harassment. The category of Sexual Harassment includes: sexual propositions, verbal abuse, and remarks about body or appearance. These incidents discussed being judged based upon dress as well as comments about appearance and "body parts." One subject wrote, "I have been extremely successful in forensics, but the one time I was most successful was when I was wearing a short-short-short skirt. "

Other subjects report experiences consistent with overemphasis on competition. Women in this study report incidents when women themselves perpetuate patriarchy in an attempt to enhance competitive success. Apparently in order to achieve their competitive goals at times some women are willing to engage in behaviors which silence other women. One subject recounts "two females use of their appearance to influence the decision in the debate rounds. I feel that it is sad when a woman has to use her appearance, instead of her intelligence to be competitive. What was worse was the male response to it. I heard male judges comment on how it was hard to concentrate on the debate because they were busy observing their figures. Furthermore, competitive value is lost when male opponents are more concerned with the size of their breasts, than the topic at hand." [errors in original]

Discussion

Because we did not confirm subjects' intention to participate it is impossible to provide any valid measure of the rate of return. Further, the minimal sample size (c.50 potential subjects) suggests this study is simply too small to allow meaningful generalization. While the small number of returned forms (20) could represent a low return rate, several variables might explain the women's apparent unwillingness to tell their stories. (1) Critical Incident studies typically produce very low sample sizes because the task of providing written incident reports to researchers can be somewhat daunting as subjects are asked to recount what may have been very unpleasant experiences in detail and at some length. (2) Low sample sizes may also result from the expectations of subjects. Research indicates women are not usually encouraged to tell their stories, and if they are, they expect them to be discounted and see the task as futile. Therefore many

women "hold back their words, especially words of anger, disgust or recrimination" (Perry 1997). (3) From the nature of comments written on several reports, many women are so conditioned socially to accepting patriarchy as a normal part of their every day lives, they do not recognize it as such, but seem to consider such behavior normal social interaction. (4) Another likely explanation is that the students were asked to complete forms during a break from competition (the evening after the first day of the tournament or during a break while waiting for the awards assembly), sometimes in the presence of male competitors. A number of male contested seemed particularly curious about the reports. One male competitor proudly announced prior to the awards assembly that he was probably mentioned on several of the reports. (5) Subjects were to return reports "anonymously" by sealing them in an unmarked envelope and dropping it into an open box near the timekeepers table in the main hallway. This situation could have discouraged those who were concerned about the potential for their reports to be read by those other than the researchers. (6) Finally, the study did not appear to have the full support of the coaches. Students were not encouraged to approach the study seriously and appeared to resent the intrusion into the "competitive arena," treating the survey with indifference and even hostility. Forensics program directors had been asked earlier to provide mailing addresses so students could receive the survey in their familiar, safe environment., but most failed to provide the needed information (some provided university addresses after students had left campus for the summer.) Male program directors were more likely to provide useful addresses than their female colleagues.

The reports we did receive provide some modest support for the taxonomy. Positive experiences appear to include, while negative experiences appear to exclude women from the forensics community. An interesting extension to the previous study (Greenstreet, Joeckel, Martin & Piercy, 1998) is participation of women in perpetuating patriarchy. More important, subjects indicate silencing behaviors continue even within a competitive circuit which as formalized its expectations that competitors demonstrate respect for all participants in the activity (judge behavior is not similarly regulated.)

Conclusion

If this small study reflects the likelihood of securing responses from women currently participating in intercollegiate forensics, future research should abandon the critical incident technique. While the use of a research method instrument in which subjects are allowed to interpret their experiences as they see them, (rather than trying to match them to a researchers' predetermined categories is desirable), the critical incident technique may simply require more than subjects are willing or able to give. The critical incident technique also limits the number of experiences a subject may report. As an alternative, a survey asking women to report the frequency of such experiences would allow researchers to begin measuring their frequency and perceived severity.

When results from this study are combined with those of the earlier study, the picture provided by the stories is of a field unprepared or unwilling to accept women as participants. Women are sexually propositioned, verbally abused, and subject to inappropriate random remarks concerning their bodies or appearance. They sometimes perceive that their responses to such behavior will determine their future success. They are discouraged from entering nontraditional fields or assuming nontraditional roles (such as arguing assertively or cross-examining aggressively). They are consistently told to stay within their traditional stereotyped female roles, and are reminded that such roles are necessarily less significant than the masculine roles within the activity. This behavior reflects the "real world" attitudes they experience as they are subjected to special gender barriers in gaining employment, and are treated as "different" (read "inferior") once employed. When they bring these problems to those who should help resolve them, they are met with indifference or are discouraged from raising legitimate concerns, and therefore silenced. They are attacked by those with whom they wish to cooperate, as if every aspect of the intercollegiate forensics community were some sort of competition where one party has to win and the other must lose. As women are continually cast in the role of the "other" they are expected to continue to fulfill the role of the stereotypical female. Patriarchy is perpetuated by typical dominant gender expectancies and male behaviors that promote advancement (Hochschild, 1989; Huff, 1990; Mason, 1998).Thus the student finds herself battling the traditional barriers she must face daily in a world that was promised to be different. Haslett, Geis, and Carter (1992) describe such behaviors as consistent with a social system used to exclude women

or devalue their work. Lewis and Simon (1986) report similar experiences in higher education classrooms. If intercollegiate forensics provides such a system, and for many of these respondents it clearly does, lack of participation by women should be easy to understand.

The objective of intercollegiate forensics is to view the competitive arena as an extension of the classroom, not merely an extra-curricular activity that provides students with an outlet for competitive urges. Intercollegiate forensics is justified educationally as a continuation of classroom-based education as rhetorical training for the average student (Bartanen, 1994). We contend students participating in intercollegiate forensics should be able to develop their skills in an environment that supports good communication practices, practices which include respect for diversity and which value difference. Current practice does not achieve those goals. It fails to include women as valued participants and it fails to teach men that silencing behaviors are inappropriate in a democratic society.

Appendix A

Taxonomy of Women's Gender-Based Experiences in Intercollegiate Forensics

Positive Experiences

I. Expressions of Gratitude or Recognition
   - A. From Males
   - B. From Females

II. Mentoring
   - A. By Males
   - B. By Females

III. Access through Quotas

IV. Consciousness-Raising

V. Nurturing/Personal Concern

Negative Experiences

I. Sexual Harassment
   - A. Sexual Propositions
   - B. Verbal Abuse
   - C. Remarks about Body or Appearance

II. Sexism
   - A. Traditional Roles
   - B. Feminine is less than Masculine

III. Discrimination in Employment

IV. Lack of Support/Failure to Recognize Problem
   - A. By Colleagues
   - B. By Coach

V. Aggression/Conflict
   - A. Female-Female
   - B. Female-Male

VI. Overemphasis on Competition

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Appendix B

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